

Nimbus Hatchery Weir Replacement Project

Summary of Stakeholder Interviews

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Bureau of Reclamation



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Introduction

In December 2008 and January 2009, Joan Chaplick, a Public Outreach Specialist with MIG, Inc., conducted telephone interviews on behalf of the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) with community members regarding their opinions about the proposed Nimbus Hatchery Weir Replacement Project. Reclamation is beginning the public scoping process for the development of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) in mid-2009. Reclamation wants to ensure its outreach process reaches a full range of interest groups and individuals, and that presenters are aware of the topics of greatest interest to the public.

Previous meetings in 2004, conducted as part of the Administrative Draft Environmental Assessment for the proposed project, were very well-attended by community members, and Reclamation conducted several forums to identify project issues and concerns at that time. Since then, Reclamation has completed studies and conducted workshops to develop and refine alternatives.

To prepare for the scoping process, Reclamation identified a list of stakeholders, representing a variety of interests, who have been active in previous meetings. Reclamation wanted to learn about their interest in the project, existing and new issues and concerns, and if any additional organizations or groups should be included in the process. The stakeholder list was supplemented with individuals recommended by some of the stakeholders during their interviews. Individuals contacted are listed at the end of this summary. Participants were asked to share their candid opinions, so the comments reported are not attributed to any specific individual.

Most participants in the interviews were well-informed about the project and had been following the project for several years. Participants were asked to share their issues and concerns and general opinion about the project. They were also asked to suggest any additional individuals who should be interviewed as part of the process, and to identify any new organizations or individuals who may be interested in the project. The main themes of the issues and concerns discussed by the participants in the interviews have been summarized and organized by the following themes:

- Project Need and Benefits
- Overall Project Opportunity
- Fish Habitat and Spawning
- Environmental Education
- Recreation – Opportunities and Potential Conflicts
- Water Levels
- Access for Persons With Disabilities
- Construction
- Cultural Resources

Project Need and Benefits

Support for the project is generally positive, and a few participants described a sense of urgency for the weir replacement project and the benefits that could be achieved. They described the current poor condition of the weir and their concerns about safety. The most important benefits would be to fish habitat and hatchery operations, and this was considered a priority for the project. Several participants commented that benefits to recreation, for example, should be considered secondary. The weir replacement project would also address potential safety issues; a few participants expressed concern about the poor condition of the weir and the potential safety impacts should the weir decline even further. Overall, participants spoke favorably of the project. They may have additional concerns as more specific details regarding the proposed location of the weir replacement and its supporting features are revealed.

Overall Project Opportunity

There is an expectation with many of participants that Reclamation and partner agencies and organizations in the area will provide leadership to maximize the benefits this project can create. Interviewees consistently identified added features they expected the project to include, and Reclamation should be prepared to articulate its role in meeting these needs. One participant identified the project as “the best opportunity in the next 50 years” to make significant improvements in this area. Given the scale of the weir replacement and removal project, many participants hope that Reclamation funding can be supplemented with funds from other sources to add a full range of features to the project. Several participants indicate that they want Reclamation to do more than just replace the weir. They hope the project can be a catalyst for significant improvements for habitat, recreation, and river access to be addressed in a creative and forward-thinking manner.

Fish Habitat and Spawning

Most participants highlighted the importance of this project to improving habitat and spawning conditions for salmon and steelhead. This is the most important goal of the project and several participants noted that other benefits should be considered secondary.

Environmental Education

Several participants suggested that the weir replacement project should include prominent opportunities for environmental education, such as signage and interactive displays. One participant considered this project to be a prime opportunity, and suggested the project serve as a focal point for environmental education and access to the river just below the dam. The weir provides an unusual and highly accessible experience for students and the general public to learn about salmon and steelhead habitat. The fish hatchery is already a popular education site and is highly valued by teachers throughout the region. Additional features would enhance the educational experience. To support this effort, it was suggested that the project include a viewing station, a natural channel, signage, and interactive exhibits, along with support amenities such as restrooms and parking to accommodate school buses and related vehicles.

Recreation – Opportunities and Potential Conflicts/Impacts

Recreation – Opportunities

Several participants commented that the weir replacement project and removal of the old weir provide a great opportunity for significant improvements in water-based recreation. The weir could be designed in a manner that accommodates features creating special conditions for kayaking and rafting. The area was identified as probably one of the few river segments in the State that could provide such an accessible opportunity so close to an urban area.

A few years ago when representatives of the San Francisco Bay Area were preparing a bid to host the Olympics, there was discussion about creating an Olympic-caliber white water kayaking course. River City Rowers acted as the sponsor for this effort.

A study was done to look at the potential habitat impacts and recreation opportunities to help determine the feasibility of a course. Two course configurations were identified, with one of the courses being located east of Hazel Avenue near the proposed replacement weir. A second course was identified in a location west of Hazel Avenue on a large parcel owned by Reclamation.

Advocates for a kayaking and boating run highlighted the recreation benefits this project could provide on the river, along with the related economic and social benefits. It's not clear how these features would be funded or operated, and there is some recognition that Reclamation does not have all the funds and resources needed to install and manage these features. The representative from the Department of Boating and Waterways expressed interest in features that would improve boating opportunities, since this agency has lead responsibilities for recreational boating in the state.

Participants commented they are supportive of a project that will improve fish habitat and help increase fish populations. They currently enjoy access to the river and will want to see year-round access maintained.

Recreation – Potential Conflicts/Impacts

One participant commented that while he supported the project based on its value at improving fish passage, he was not opposed to incorporating new elements or improvements for recreation – as long as they could “peacefully co-exist.” This was a common theme in several interviews; improvements made to enhance recreation should not diminish conditions for the fish or require significant management or enforcement activities to ensure their success.

There were comments that some of the modifications proposed to improve kayaking, for example, might not be compatible with safe fish passage. The course might be more successful and manageable in a different location.

One participant expressed concern about the scale of impacts and seasonality of the kayaking and boating course. The course could easily be overwhelmed by its immediate popularity, and it would likely be at capacity as soon as it was available for use. Use of the run would most likely need to be limited during spawning season to protect the fish, and there would need to be resources to ensure the course was being used safely and appropriately. A fee-based course would likely be unpopular with many users, and it is unclear who how this area would be managed. One participant suggested that when the weir is removed, a feature such as a play hole could be added, but not of the scale that would create a destination course.

There are also concerns about user conflicts. Different enhancements will influence usage by a particular group. For example, the water course might be less desirable for canoers in the area.

Some participants also commented that disruption to trails for cyclists, runners and walkers should be minimized during construction to ensure unimpeded use during construction.

Loss of Parking

A few participants commented that there will likely be some concern over the loss of parking, since Reclamation lands provide convenient, free parking close to the river. Also, boaters and fisherman are able to drive to the river and keep their vehicles in view. Several participants commented that there is plenty of available parking within a short walking radius and paid parking appears to be readily available on nearby County park lands. Users in the area have shown a limited interest in using these parking areas.

Water Levels

A few participants commented on low water levels in the river over the past several years. There was some concern that continued low water levels might reduce the feasibility of some of the proposed water-based recreation features. Several participants commented that it had been awhile since they have seen substantial high water flows on the river.

Access for Disabled Persons

One participant noted that handicapped accessibility was an important issue that needed to be addressed. He knows several individuals who have a difficult time getting to the river. He commented that projects like gravel restoration, for example, make access more difficult. They often increase slope, add barriers, and use surfacing that is slippery or difficult to navigate. This participant noted that he felt like the lone voice on this important issue and that if he weren't championing it, it might be overlooked. He commented that he wasn't aware of any organizations in the area such as disabled sportsmen's' groups to contact to get involved in the project and advocate for better access. He will continue to participate and highlight this issue.

Construction Impacts

A few participants briefly noted that there would be impacts during the construction process, and that care should be taken to minimize disruption to trails, access and parking, and to minimize noise, dust and other related construction impacts such as truck traffic. Most of these impacts were considered to be limited to the construction period and could be addressed through project planning, added signage, and consistent communication with nearby homeowners and recreation user groups.

Cultural Resources

One participant expressed concern about the need to carefully address the protection of cultural resources and tribal interests during project planning and implementation. Representatives of the tribes will likely have a high level of interest and it was recommended that Reclamation begin consultation as early as possible.

Interview Participants

MIG spoke with the following individuals who shared their opinions about the proposed project and suggested additional individuals to be contacted.

- Dianna Aguilar, American River Parkway Foundation
- Mike Ammon, Department of Boating and Waterways
- Dan Bacher, the Fish Sniffer
- Rod Hall, former Bureau of Reclamation project staff
- Tom Gorhing, Water Forum
- Michael Picker, Kayaking interests
- Felix Smith, Save the American River
- Warren Truitt, Save the American River
- Rene Villanueva, Long-time local fishing guide
- Bob Whitford, CSU Aquatic Center
- Leo Winternitz, Delta project Director, The Nature Conservancy
- Randy Yonemura, Tribal Consultant

MIG contacted additional individuals who were not available or did not return calls.